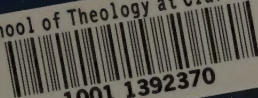


School of Theology at Claremont



1001 1392370

ACCESSION NUMBER

SHELF NUMBER



Theology Library

SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY
AT CLAREMONT
California

J. S. ARMENTROUT

LIBRARY
SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA SCHOOL
OF THEOLOGY
CLAREMONT, CALIF.

THE CALVERT SERIES

HILAIRE BELLOC, *General Editor*

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH
AND CONFESSION

THE CALVERT SERIES

HILAIRE BELLOC, *General Editor*

Belloc: THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND HISTORY

Chesterton: THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND CON-
VERSION

McNabb: THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND PHI-
LOSOPHY

Ward: THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND THE AP-
PEAL TO REASON

Windle: THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND ITS RE-
ACTIONS WITH SCIENCE

Gillis: THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND THE HOME

Walsh: THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND HEALING

Ryan: THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND THE CITI-
ZEN

Pope: THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND THE BIBLE

Geddes and Thurston: THE CATHOLIC
CHURCH AND CONFESSION

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND CONFESSION

BX
2265
64

BY
LEONARD GEDDES, S.J., D.D.
AND
HERBERT THURSTON, S.J.

New York
THE MACMILLAN COMPANY
1928

All rights reserved

COPYRIGHT, 1928,
By THE MACMILLAN COMPANY.

Set up and electrotyped.
Published October, 1928.

Printed in the United States of America by
J. J. LITTLE AND IVES COMPANY, NEW YORK

Nihil Obstat:

ARTHUR J. SCANLAN, S.T.D.,

Censor Librorum

Imprimatur:

✠ PATRICK CARDINAL HAYES,

Archbishop, New York

NEW YORK, MAY 29, 1928.

334775

EDITOR'S PREFACE

THE doctrine and practice of the Catholic Church in the matter of auricular confession, and sacramental absolution from the priesthood, is perhaps the most outstanding of those points in which the Catholic Communion has been criticized by the Reformed Churches in modern times.

I say "in modern times" because it is clear (as will be seen from the book for which these words are written) that the original feeling of the matter in the turmoil of the Reformation was by no means so clear-cut. There was emphasis upon the penitent's own attitude, a whittling down of the priestly absolution; but neither in the Germanies nor in England (after the Reformation had there triumphed) was confession originally regarded as something abhorrent. In the Seventeenth Century, notably, it seems to have been regarded by a large portion of those in communion with the Established Church as a normal practice.

It is to-day that the contrast between the Catholic doctrine and habit on the one hand and the almost complete cessation of anything resembling that habit and doctrine outside the Catholic Church, has become glaring.

For this reason it is especially necessary to-day

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND CONFESSION

that both a clear definition of the doctrine, a description of the practice and a defense, from tradition and from the Scripture, of both, should be presented to the non-Catholic reader. The first necessity in approaches between the Catholic Church and inquirers upon it, or even opponents of it, is comprehension. After comprehension has been achieved (and not before) debate can be pursued and judgment exercised. The modern man inquiring, whether from hostility or from curiosity, how his Catholic fellow-citizen stands in this matter, has the answer, I think, fully presented in the pages that follow. *The Editor.*

CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. THE DOCTRINE	13
§ I. The Sacrament of Penance	13
§ II. The Penitent	22
§ III. The Minister	34
II. THE DOCTRINE IN SCRIPTURE	39
III. CONFESSION IN THE EARLY AND MEDIEVAL CHURCH	56
IV. CONFESSION JUDGED BY REASON AND EXPERI- ENCE	85

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH
AND CONFESSION

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND CONFESSION

CHAPTER I THE DOCTRINE

§ i

The Sacrament of Penance

One aspect of an organization when viewed in isolation can hardly be correctly appreciated. It forms part of a harmonious whole. Its relations with other parts enter into its own essence, and a realization of them is necessary for a just understanding of the thing itself. So, for instance, of a popular institution that forms part of the life of a nation: he only can completely understand its workings who has lived that life and realizes how this institution completes and harmonizes with the rest of that life. Or again, an idea forming part of a philosophy can hardly be judged apart from that philosophy. And so it is with the doctrines of the Catholic Church. They form a coherent system in which part is interrelated with part. From their interrelations emerges a harmonious whole. For

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND CONFESSION

one who has lived that life, intellectually and morally, any doctrine may bear quite a different meaning from that which it assumes for one who views it from without and in isolation. This is, no doubt, at the root of the misapprehensions that have grown up regarding many of those doctrines. They have been judged by those who had not the data for judging them aright, and a tradition of mistrust has grown up.

The object of this book is to clear away misapprehensions regarding the doctrine of confession of sins. It is impossible indeed within the limits assigned to place that doctrine in its full setting; but an attempt can be made to show how it fits into, and is a rational part of a great system, and to show also that it is not a man-made doctrine. It forms an important part both of Catholic doctrine and of Catholic life, and it is hoped that a simple statement of what Catholics really do hold and practice, in this as in other matters, may help to pave the way to a sympathetic understanding of the Catholic Church herself.

Christ our Lord founded his Church to carry on the work He came on earth to do, the eternal salvation of man. That may be considered the starting point of the Catholic system. Our Lord's activity among men was not to come to an end with that marvelous life; it was to continue not merely through the internal action of His grace in their minds and hearts, but also through the external

THE DOCTRINE

organization He set up. For His followers were not left an unorganized mass. They were divided into rulers and ruled: the Twelve on the one hand, the main body of His disciples on the other. The Twelve were made the depositories of powers He left behind Him, of ruling, teaching and sanctifying. At the end they were commissioned to go out into the whole world and make all men their disciples, and in their work He promised His abiding presence with them to the end of time.¹ In these words He guaranteed at once their perpetuity as a body—He could not continue with them to the end of time if they should cease to be—and His own endless spiritual activity through their means. The Twelve, therefore, had and have successors. The Apostolic College must be still living and functioning unless the promise of Christ has failed. The Catholic Church holds that it has been constituted, from the days of the Apostles onward, by the Bishops in communion with the Head of the College, the successor of St. Peter. These, as they have been one by one lawfully appointed and consecrated, have thereby been coöpted into that College. It is through them, therefore, that Christ our Lord is carrying on His work of regeneration. He is with them as He promised to be with His appointed Twelve; however unworthy they may be, they are the channel through which His Life is to flow to men.

¹ Matt. xxviii. 18-20.

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND CONFESSION

That His commission to the Twelve and their successors carried the threefold duty of ruling, of teaching and of sanctifying, the three aspects of His own activity when among men, follows immediately from the terms of His promises and commission. It would, however, be outside the scope of this work to develop the proof of it from the words of Our Lord. It must suffice to point out that He did choose and institute visible means of perpetuating this activity when He might have chosen invisible ones. He might have chosen to teach by the inward enlightening of the minds of those whom He wished to draw to Himself; to rule by the guidance of the Holy Spirit; to sanctify by the infusion of his grace without any external and visible agency. Actually He chose to carry on His work till the end of time through visible means, through those whom He had chosen to be the human channels of His own activity. Thus the gate of entrance into His Church and the first condition of obtaining Life in Him and being in the way of salvation is baptism; and baptism implies a baptizer and an external rite. His Apostles were commissioned to teach: "Make ye all men your disciples"; "He that heareth you heareth Me." The faith without which even baptism would be void was to "come by hearing," by the external ministry of those whom He "sent" to preach.² Again in the eyes of every Christian the Eucharist, how-

² Rom. ix. 14, 15.

THE DOCTRINE

ever much or however little it may mean to him, is a means instituted by Christ of quickening within him the life of the Spirit; an external means again.

Certainly one of Our Lord's purposes in coming on earth was to procure for man forgiveness of his sins; not merely rehabilitation from original sin but pardon for his own actual transgressions. Our Lord made this pardon possible by making, as man himself could not do, complete satisfaction for sin to the outraged honor of Almighty God, by His passion and death. That we confess as one of the foundations of our faith. But it still leaves the question as to how these merits are applied to the individual sinner. There must be something required on his part; at least an interior act of rejection of sin and submission to God, whose authority he has rejected. The Church holds indeed that such an act is absolutely necessary. No sin is ever forgiven so long as the sinner clings to it. He must repent and humbly beg God's pardon before the question of forgiveness can arise. But this, the Church holds, is not enough. As Our Lord Himself conferred forgiveness by external action so He has made this ministry of healing a visible one for all time. The means by which the merits of Christ are applied to sinners and by which they are cleansed from the guilt of sin is the Sacrament of Penance—confession.

In this chapter the outlines of the doctrine concerning that Sacrament will be stated; proof of the

chief points will be given in the chapters which succeed. The Church holds that Christ gave real power to the Apostles, and through them to the hierarchical Church, to take away by Sacramental absolution not merely the effects of sin but the guilt itself. It is not that his sins are, as in the Lutheran theory of forgiveness, covered by the merits of Christ and no longer regarded by God, while still remaining in his soul, nor that, though still a sinner, he is freed from the debt of punishment to be undergone. He who has validly received the Sacrament of Penance stands before God free from all guilt and sinless. And the cause of this is the Sacramental absolution applying to him the merits of Christ. There are certain conditions to be fulfilled. Certain acts of his own are necessary—at least sorrow for sin and purpose to avoid it for the future. But it is not these that free him from guilt and raise him from spiritual death to supernatural life. That is done by the Sacrament.

A Sacrament produces its effect *ex opere operato*, to use the technical term: that is through the value of the act done, and not, as a cause, through the merits of the person by whom or to whom it is done. "The act done" is here the absolution given by Bishop or priest. That has its value from the fact that it is in some sort the act of Christ Himself. He instituted each of the Sacraments as the means whereby the merits of His Passion should be applied to individual men according to their particular needs.

THE DOCTRINE

He has commissioned His ministers to act in His name in administering them and has promised to ratify their action, so that the sacramental act done by his appointed minister takes on the dignity and value of an act done by Christ Himself. In that is contained the root idea of a Christian sacrament. St. Augustine expresses this strikingly of baptism when speaking of the baptism of Christ in the Jordan:

Though many were to baptize, whether just or unjust, only to Him should be ascribed the sanctifying power of baptism upon whom descended the Dove. . . . Peter baptises: He it is who baptises; Paul baptises: He it is who baptises; Judas baptises: He it is who baptises.³

So, too, of this Sacrament. The Pharisees asked, "Who can forgive sins but God alone." And the question was a fair one. Sin is a matter between the sinner and God. It is only because He was God as well as man that Jesus Christ could in His right actually take away the guilt of sin. Living on earth He exercised that power by His own personal action. That He still exercises it through the ministers of His hierarchical Church is that Church's teaching, how amply justified, will be seen in the following chapter.

This, then, is the essential point of the doctrine,

³In Joan, Tr. vi, n. 7.

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND CONFESSION

that as the priest absolving is by Christ's institution His representative and vicegerent; his action, the words, "I absolve thee from thy sins," is the efficacious means of applying the merits of Christ for the remission of sins. It is for this that the penitent presents himself at the tribunal of Penance, and not, at least primarily, that he may obtain that peace of conscience that comes from unburdening the soul, nor the guidance and strength that come from wise counsel and encouragement. He will indeed ordinarily find these too, but what he primarily seeks is what is done to his soul in the sight of God alone, the setting of it free from the stain of sin.

Penance is a sacrament in its own right: it is in no sense a repetition of baptism. It depends upon baptism only to this extent, that the latter sacrament, as the gateway to the Church, must have been received before one can be capable of receiving any of the other Sacraments with which Our Lord has dowered His Church. Baptism remits original sin and all actual sins committed before its reception; Penance was expressly instituted for the forgiveness of sins committed after baptism.

It is moreover not an optional Sacrament. In this connection it may be noted that the distinction between mortal or grievous sin and venial sin forms an important aspect of Catholic doctrine, and is essential for the right understanding of the doctrine concerning the Sacrament of Penance. It emerges clearly from the words of Holy Scripture. There

THE DOCTRINE

the word "sin" has certainly different implications. On the one hand it is the utterly destructive thing: sinners shall hear from Our Lord the terrible words of eternal condemnation (Matt. xxv. 41), and "the soul that sinneth the same shall die" (Ezech. xviii. 4); on the other hand St. John declares, "If we say that we have no sin we deceive ourselves" (I Jn. i. 8). St. John clearly regards himself and those whom he addresses in that epistle as "living," not "dead" (cf. I Jn. iii. 14; v. 11, 12). St. Paul supplies the key when (I Cor. vi. 9, 10, and Eph. iv, 5) he enumerates the sort of sins which exclude from the kingdom of Heaven. These are sins of their nature grievous; they are violations of eternal holiness against which Almighty God absolutely sets His face. It cannot indeed be imagined that the law of God, who is infinitely just, could demand the most extreme penalty for the most trifling offense.

The Church therefore teaches that for a sin to be "mortal"—to destroy the supernatural life of the soul, to forfeit the friendship of Almighty God and deserve eternal reprobation—the thing done must itself be grave in the conscience of the person who does it, and it must be done with full knowledge and consent. The others indeed are offenses, but offenses which do not set the one who commits them absolutely in opposition to God, and which He more easily pardons. What sins are grave of their nature can be gathered from the words of Scripture and the

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND CONFESSION

tradition of the Church. No priest can be admitted to the office of hearing confessions until he has shown a competent knowledge of this matter.

For those then who, after baptism, have lost the grace of God by grievous sin,⁴ confession is the one way instituted by Christ of recovering that grace by divine pardon. At the same time the Church recognizes that where the reception of the Sacrament is impossible—where, for instance, the person who has sinned deeply does not know it to be the means of pardon—its place can be supplied by true contrition proceeding from the love of God. But even in this case its necessity remains objectively present, and when the impossibility ceases the obligation of seeking absolution for all grievous sins is incumbent upon the one who has sinned, though he is now in the grace of God.

§ ii

The Penitent

While the gift of pardon received in the Sacrament of Penance is not given in virtue of the meritorious acts of the penitent, but in virtue of the merits of Christ alone, yet, as was said above, those acts are required, in their different measure. They are briefly described as contrition, confession and satisfaction, and it will be well at this point to consider their nature.

THE DOCTRINE

Contrition

The Council of Trent, which systematized but did not alter the Church's teaching in the Sacrament of Penance, describes contrition as "sorrow of heart and detestation of sin committed, together with a desire to sin no more", in other words, true repentance. Contrition is, on the part of the penitent, an even more fundamental thing than confession. The question of forgiveness cannot arise at all until the person who has sinned places himself in a humbled position before his offended Maker, and turns, at least in his heart, from his sins. The will to go on sinning, or even to cling to the sin committed, and divine pardon are clearly incompatible. To attempt to receive the Sacrament of Penance without contrition merely adds to the sinner's guilt. But this detestation of sin and determination to sin no more may come from diverse motives. A man may be moved thereto by sheer love of God. It cannot be doubted that many have been moved to true grief for their sins by the thought of the goodness and loving-kindness of Almighty God, whose honor has been outraged by them. This is what is called "perfect contrition." In so far as fear is contained in it, it is fear of the just indignation of God against sin, not of the punishments He inflicts upon the sinner.

From this lofty and beautiful disposition of soul is distinguished what is called "imperfect contri-

tion," or "attrition." Several motives, all of them falling short of the love of God for the sake of His perfection and loveliness, but all concerned with God, can be the foundation of this sorrow: the baseness and degradation of sin, the fact that it deprives the sinner of the eternal possession of God, even fear of the punishments which God visits on those who transgress His law.⁵ It must be noted, however, that sorrow from such motives is a virtuous act, and so the sort of sorrow that is necessary for the Sacrament of Penance, only if it is somehow concerned with Almighty God and not merely with the sinner. It must embody a real turning away from sin and hatred of it, neither of which would be involved in mere fear of the consequences of sin as painful to the sinner. The drunkard who repents merely because he sees his career in danger of being ruined, the adulterer who is moved to remorse solely by the fear of the break-up of his home, are not eliciting acts of the virtue of contrition. So, also, as regards fear of God's punishment of sin: he whose frame of mind was that he would go on sinning if there were no hell, would not be detesting sin, nor would his act be contrition in any sense; it would be selfishness, not virtue.

⁵ That the sentiment of fear of God can be holy is clear from the fact that Our Lord exhorts us to it: "Fear ye not them that kill the body and are not able to kill the soul, but rather fear Him that can destroy both body and soul in hell (Matt. x. 28); and we are told that "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (Prov. i. 7).

THE DOCTRINE

Of these two sorts of contrition it is held that the first, perfect contrition, procures pardon and justification of itself, apart from the Sacrament; but that the obligation remains to submit all grievous sins, though they have been so forgiven, to the judgment of the Church in Confession. In fact the intention of doing this must accompany the act of contrition, otherwise it has not the effect of deleting the guilt of sin. This intention, however, may be merely virtual, at least in the case of one who did not know of the obligation. And such a virtual intention would almost necessarily be present in one who made an act of perfect contrition. For an act of the love of God would imply the will to carry out all his commands if known, and so a virtual willingness to carry out this particular command.

The second sort, attrition, though not sufficient to justify the sinner of itself, does make the Sacrament valid, so that the Sacramental absolution gives that pardon which the sinner's own act has not procured.

Both contrition and attrition must have certain qualities in order to be sufficient either with or without the Sacrament. There must be a true detestation of sin in the will, not a mere sensible emotion. This detestation, moreover, must extend to all grievous sins: one who renounces some sins but clings to others is not really on the side of God, and not one to whom He can grant that forgiveness which brings with it the blessing of His divine friend-

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND CONFESSION

ship. And lastly it must be supreme: such that sin is hated above every other evil. This does not mean that it must be hated more ardently: that would be demanding the impossible of human nature: but that it be recognized that sin is worse than every other evil; that one do not put other evils in the balance against it, and say, "For this would I sin again."

Lastily contrition to be valid must embody a determination to avoid for the future all mortal sins. This is called the purpose of amendment. It must be absolute, not conditional. At the same time such a determination is not incompatible with a very definite fear that one will fall again. It is the present intention, the present state of one's will, that is of importance, not the reliance that can be placed upon it. Also though the will not to sin must be absolute and complete, one is not bound to contemplate explicitly all the possibilities of temptation that may arise and make definite resolutions about each of them.

Confession

It is the obligation of confession that makes the Sacrament of Penance the object of fear and distrust on the part of those outside the Church. Questions naturally present themselves: why should one confess one's sins to a man? Why confess at all since God, whose forgiveness is sought, knows

THE DOCTRINE

them already? What Scripture warrant is there for such a practice? An attempt will be made later to answer these questions, and to show that by Christ's institution confession of sins is necessary. Here we will merely consider what the Church's doctrine is.

The Council of Trent, summing up what was universally held in the Catholic Church, as against the Protestant reformers, states that it has always been the mind of the Church that Christ, in instituting the Sacrament of Penance instituted confession itself, and that confession is necessary to all who, after baptism, have fallen into grievous sin, because He left as His vicars priests, to whom, as to judges, all mortal sins must be submitted. That gives the substance of the doctrine concerning confession of sins. The confessor is not merely the minister of a Sacrament, he is also a judge; he must know what he is judging. Consequently all grievous sins, as they are in the conscience of the penitent, must be made known to him. The nature of the sins must be declared and, as far as possible, the number of times they have been committed. A mere general declaration of sinfulness, though it might have some value as an act of humility, does not suffice for the Sacrament. The wilful concealment of a grievous sin makes the Sacrament invalid and the act of attempting it grievously sinful. Even secret sins, those, for instance, of thought and desire, must be manifested. The evil of such thoughts and desires lies not merely in the fact that they are sources

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND CONFESSION

of evil act, but also in the fact that they are in themselves wicked. This is clearly true of evil desires. And also by mere complacence in what is grievously sinful—recalling, for instance, with satisfaction, a sinful act, or wilfully approving what is forbidden—man sets himself in his highest faculties, intellect and will, in opposition to the law of God. Accordingly such sins must be confessed with the same exactness, in so far as that is possible, as sins of act. This obligation of full confession does not mean, however, that wicked acts, whether external or merely internal, must be described in every detail. Sins fall into classes. It is the class of sin that must be indicated; details only in so far as they put the sin into a different class. The experienced confessor easily helps the penitent to carry out his obligation in this matter without allowing him to elaborate details that are not necessary, and the recounting of which would merely be painful both for the confessor and for the penitent.

That this obligation of confession may be duly carried out the penitent is bound to make a careful examination of his conscience. It is not allowed just to mention the sins that immediately occur to one, not caring greatly whether the sins he confesses be indeed all that he has committed or not. Indeed the Church insists much on the advisability, though not the obligation, of frequent, in fact daily, examination of conscience, and this not merely that one may more easily prepare for confession when the

THE DOCTRINE

time comes, but also for the advantages of the exercise regarded in itself. It saves one from living in a fool's paradise, and aids to abiding sorrow for sin and care in avoiding it. It is impossible to lay down a hard and fast rule as to the amount of examination of conscience that is required for confession. On the one hand it must be "diligent," on the other it is certainly not meant to be a torture of the soul. Theologians give as a standard the sort of care that a prudent man would give to any important business, and even that only in so far as it is within the bounds of reasonable possibility. A person who is very ill is incapable of such mental effort, nor can the same rigor of self-examination be expected from one who is ignorant as from one with a trained mind. Again it is the business of the prudent confessor to judge whether reasonable prudence has been employed, and to help the penitent who needs help in this matter.

It is to be noted that actual confession of each individual sin is not an essential condition for its forgiveness. What is required is that there be reasonable examination, and that no mortal sin be wilfully omitted. If any such are omitted through inadvertence, their guilt is forgiven by the absolution just as if they had been confessed. But if the penitent afterwards becomes aware of the omission, an obligation at once arises to confess them the next time one receives the Sacrament of Penance. But that obligation only arises when one is certain

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND CONFESSION

both that they are mortal and that they have never been confessed. In any case of doubt the presumption is in favor of the liberty of the penitent. Former confessions are presumed to have been rightly made unless that presumption is overruled by a contrary certainty.

Lastly, formal confession, though a part of the Sacrament, is only of obligation in so far as it is reasonably possible. A dying person will frequently be incapable of it. So is one who is dumb; for as confession should be by word of mouth one who cannot speak is not bound to write his sins down and submit them to the priest. But all these, unless they are unconscious, are capable of making some sign to show that they are acting as penitents, and in their case this takes the place of oral confession.

Satisfaction

Satisfaction on the part of the penitent consists in accepting and performing penitential good works imposed by the confessor. It does not belong to the essence of the Sacrament in the same way as contrition and confession do; ordinarily it is done after the Sacrament has been received, and failure to do it cannot then make the Sacrament invalid. But it belongs to the essence of the Sacrament to this extent, that it must be *accepted* by the penitent under pain of nullity.

The doctrine behind the imposition of satisfac-

THE DOCTRINE

tion involves several points. That guilt of sin and debt of punishment due to it are separate things, and one may be blotted out and the other, at least to some extent, left; again, that while repentance and absolution cancel the guilt and the eternal punishment, they do not necessarily cancel the debt of temporal punishment; moreover, that one whose guilt has been forgiven can, by penitential works, cancel the debt of temporal punishment still due for his sins; and consequently that the confessor has both the right and the duty to impose satisfactory works upon the penitent as a condition of absolution.

The first and second of these points are bound up with one another. If guilt can be removed and punishment remain, then they are separable. That such is the case has always been the teaching of the Church, as even the Reformers acknowledged.⁶ There is ample warrant for it in Scripture. No one can doubt, for instance that Moses was forgiven for his sin of distrust in striking the rock a second time, but still the penalty remained till the end of his life.⁷ Still more striking is the case of David.⁸ He is expressly told by the prophet, "The Lord hath taken away thy sin," but the temporal punishment remains: "The child that is born to thee shall surely die." It is only temporal punishment that is in question, whether it be due to mortal or venial sin. The Church has always held that the debt

⁶ *Calvin Instit.*, III, 4, 38.

⁷ Num. xx. 12ff.

⁸ II Kings, II Sam., xii. 13ff.

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND CONFESSION

of eternal punishment is remitted with the guilt. Both the justice and the mercy of God appear to require that, and the Scripture instances are all concerned with temporal punishment even when it is a case of grievous sin.

That one who has sinned can obtain remission of temporal punishment by his own satisfaction has also been the teaching of the Church throughout the ages. Again there is Scriptural warrant. John the Baptist exhorts the Jews to bring forth worthy fruit of penitence;⁹ God¹⁰ promises to remit his punishment of plague and pestilence if the people turn to him in prayer and penance. Daniel¹¹ exhorts the king to redeem his sins with alms and his iniquities with works of mercy to the poor. The Church then has had ample warrant in revelation for her practice both of exhorting the faithful to voluntary penance and of imposing works of satisfaction upon them when they present themselves at her tribunal of forgiveness. Nor indeed is it difficult to believe that it must be possible so to cancel by our prayer, fasting and alms deeds the temporal punishment that may be due. We can merit by our good works in the sight of God; and satisfaction, atonement made to God's justice, is a form of merit. Needless to say, this atonement made by us is only operative through the merits of Jesus Christ. He is the source and fount of everything that can contribute to our eternal salvation.

⁹ Luc. iii. 8.

¹⁰ II Par. vii. 13, 14.

¹¹ Iv. 24.

THE DOCTRINE

It is clear then that the performance of works of satisfaction is for the spiritual good of one who has sinned, and it would be at least an act of charity to advise such works to one who confesses his sins. But it was asserted further that the confessor has both a right and a duty to impose some salutary penance. As to his right to do so, as he can either give or withhold absolution, so, if he will, he can give it conditionally. He has the right to "bind" as well as to "loose,"¹² and the performance of a penance which is purely for the penitent's good is a perfectly reasonable condition to impose. That he has a duty in the matter comes immediately from the obligation imposed on him by the Church to enjoin some such works of satisfaction; fundamentally it is based upon the duty of the Church and her ministers to have serious care for the spiritual well-being of her children. As the Council of Trent points out, sins should not be so lightly forgiven that the sinner comes to think little of them and risk falling into more grievous ones. The performance of a penance, especially if it be an exacting one, besides canceling his debt of temporal punishment is likely to render him more watchful for the future.

Normally nowadays the satisfaction imposed consists in the saying of prayers enjoined. No doubt the much greater frequency of confession is responsible for the mitigation of severity in this direction.

¹² Matt. xviii. 18.

§ iii

The Minister of Penance

There are certain points to be noted concerning the minister of Penance, and his duties and obligations. He must, in the first place, be a validly ordained priest. But that is not enough. Penance is a tribunal, and the confessor acts as judge with the power and responsibility of pronouncing a definitive verdict. For that he must have jurisdiction. Power of orders is not sufficient; in that this Sacrament is different from every other. Bishops possess this jurisdiction with regard to their subjects in virtue of the fact that they are the successors of the Apostles to whom, as a body, Our Lord committed universal power of binding and loosing. Certain others, among them parish priests and the superiors of some religious orders, by grant of the Church receive this power along with their office. Other confessors must receive it by special delegation. Without it any absolution given is null. When jurisdiction is delegated the person delegating it may impose limitations as to its use, limitations which affect the persons to whom he may administer the Sacrament of Penance or the sins he may absolve. Sins so withdrawn from the confessor's jurisdiction are said to be "reserved." Any validly ordained priest, however, can absolve a person in danger of death. The Church explicitly grants jurisdiction in

THE DOCTRINE

this case, and this even though the priest be excommunicate, heretic or schismatic.

Among the duties of the confessor two are outstanding: the duty of warning the penitent of his obligations, and the duty of absolute secrecy—the seal of confession. The first of them arises from the fact that he is bound, in so far as he can, both to protect the law of God and to have care for the spiritual well-being of his penitent. If the penitent will not engage to obey his warning, he must in certain cases refuse absolution, as such recalcitrancy on the part of the penitent is a clear sign of want of contrition or purpose of amendment, both of which are of their nature absolutely necessary for the validity of the Sacrament. Thus a confessor should warn a penitent who has violated justice in a gravely important matter by injuring another either in goods or character that, before he can receive absolution, he must engage to set right the injustice he has done. If he has spread lying reports which have done serious harm to someone, he must contradict them. If he has stolen he must restore: a thief cannot be left in quiet possession of his ill-gotten gains. So insistent is this obligation that if, for some reason, it is impossible to restore to the person or persons from whom he has stolen, he must make restitution by giving to the poor. There is no denying that an unwillingness to face up to this obligation deters some people from confession; those, for instance, who are conscious of morally in-

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND CONFESSION

defensible action in commercial life. But on the other hand the enforcement of it in the confessional—and the confessor has no choice in the matter—is certainly one of the ways in which the Sacrament of Penance is a vast power for good. Or again, it may be clear to the confessor that the penitent is persistently and voluntarily putting himself in a position in which there is the gravest danger of his sinning grievously, and in which, as a matter of fact, he does so sin frequently. Such a man cannot be seriously resolved to avoid sin if he intends to cling to what is a constant occasion of it. Here again it is the confessor's duty to warn, and to refuse absolution if the penitent refuses to heed the warning. Thus for a man who is entangled in a sinful intimacy with a married woman, it is not sufficient to make a resolution to avoid sin. Unless he is also ready to take steps to make the danger of sin remote, such a resolution is nugatory; and it may be that the only step that gives a prospect of security is to break off the intimacy altogether.

The obligation of the seal of confession needs little explanation. It is the strictest obligation of secrecy that exists. The confessor may under no conceivable circumstances betray anything that has been said to him by a penitent with a view to obtaining absolution. This is true even if for want of true purpose of amendment or for any other reason the penitent has not obtained absolution. The confessor would commit a most grave sin who violated

THE DOCTRINE

this secrecy even in the most trifling matter. It is not necessary to add that no power, within or without the Church, could give him leave to do so. He must be ready to undergo any hardship, even death itself, in defence of this obligation of secrecy. It is clear that this must be so. Confession would become intolerable if there were any doubt in the minds of the faithful as to the reliance that could be placed on the confessor's secrecy. Nor does it bind only him. Anyone who obtains knowledge of another's confession—for instance by overhearing it, or a part of it, or from an unguarded word of the confessor—is under exactly the same obligation in this matter as the confessor himself.

Besides this direct obligation of secrecy the seal induces certain indirect obligations. The confessor may not through knowledge so derived do anything that may tend to make confession more difficult for the penitent. He may not in his dealings with him show any knowledge of anything so learned, nor make any change in his manner toward him; he may not speak to the penitent of anything told him in confession without the penitent's free and formal consent; he may not use such knowledge for external government (this refers particularly to religious superiors who may happen to hear the confessions of their subjects); he may not allow his external conduct, even in matters which do not concern the penitent, to be influenced by confessional knowledge. Theologians make this exception, that if

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND CONFESSION

thereby he is reminded of his own duty in some external matter he may take advantage of that reminder to carry out with greater strictness the duty he was neglecting, providing there is no danger of this greater care being connected by anyone with anything heard in confession.

Human nature being what it is, the perfection with which the seal of confession is observed would seem to be due to the direct providence of Almighty God, and to his protection of this Sacrament against dangers arising from human weakness. Among all the accusations brought against the Church that of laxity regarding the seal of confession finds no place.

CHAPTER II

THE DOCTRINE IN SCRIPTURE

It would be impossible within the brief limits imposed to establish in detail all the doctrine set forth in the last chapter. So in this one all that is aimed at is to give the outline of the justification, based on the words of Our Lord, of the chief ones, viz., the hierarchical Church's power of forgiving sins, the necessity of submitting them to her judgment if they are grievous, and the obligation of confessing them in order to obtain that forgiveness.

Christ our Lord certainly did not expect his followers to be sinless. He compares his Church, the Kingdom of Heaven upon earth, to a net cast into the sea, and containing all sorts of fishes, good and bad;¹ he warns them that scandals must come;² he warns them too of the peril of being lost, body and soul.³ On the other hand there must be means of obtaining forgiveness, in fact he bids them pray that their sins may be forgiven them and declares that it is the will of his Father that not one should perish.⁴ We are here considering what is the

¹ Matt. xiii. 47-50.

² Matt. x. 28.

³ Matt. xviii. 7.

⁴ Matt. xviii. 12-14.

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND CONFESSION

means of that forgiveness according to the plan of Our Lord. As was said above, Our Lord having instituted his visible Church with all its visible and external means of promoting the salvation of men, it is to be expected that He will have provided a visible and external means to meet this great need of forgiveness of sins. We find it, moreover, at least suggested in the promise he made, first to St. Peter, then to all the Apostles collectively, of unlimited power not merely of "binding" but also of "loosing": "Whatsoever you shall bind on earth shall be bound also in Heaven, and whatsoever you shall loose on earth shall be loosed also in Heaven."⁵ The promise is universal. All bonds that can be loosed in the sight of Heaven can be so loosed by those whom Our Lord has chosen to carry on upon earth his work of bringing about men's salvation. Among these bonds is that by which man is debtor to God by the guilt of sin. Our Lord loosed it many times during His life. If His words are to be taken at their face value He guarantees that same power to Peter and to His Apostles. And it would appear that this must mean real forgiveness, the taking away of guilt. For it is not a freeing from the bond in the sight of men, even in the sight of the Church, but "in heaven," in the sight of God. This conclusion is confirmed when it is noted that the point that led up to this promise in the case of the Apostles was

⁵ Matt. xviii. 18; cf. Matt. xvi. 19.

THE DOCTRINE IN SCRIPTURE

precisely the question of what should be done in the case of one who has sinned. The words, "If thy brother sin"⁶ introduce this section of Our Lord's discourse. It is a question of how sinners are to be dealt with. The conclusion is inevitable, that the bond of sin itself can be loosed. Upon sins, therefore, the hierarchical Church, represented in the Apostles, can pronounce a definitive sentence that really binds or really looses. And the terms of this promise are universal—*whatsoever*, ὅσα ἐὰν—so that it cannot possibly be restricted to the power of settling disputes between the brethren, or compelling a disturber of the peace to see the error of his ways. The terms of the grant cover wider ground than the particular case which, in the discourse of Our Lord, was the occasion of its being given.

It may be well to point out that these words, "Whatsoever you shall bind, etc.," do not refer only to the forgiveness of sins. They are universal, and promise an unrestricted power of imposing and loosing moral bonds. That means jurisdiction in the widest sense: power to make laws, to judge delinquents, and to coerce. The power of judging sinners and giving a verdict on them that should be valid in the sight of God is only one aspect of the universal jurisdiction promised, but the aspect that concerns us here.

⁶ Matt. xviii. 15. The words "against thee" do not occur in the Greek text.

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND CONFESSION

And who are they to whom this power of binding and loosing is committed? Peter in the first case;⁷ that admits of no doubt. And in the second case it is certainly the Apostles. By a piece of special pleading it has been interpreted of the whole body of the faithful, but that is clearly doing violence to the words. There is question of a formal decision by the Church. The Church decides not through the body of her members but through her rulers commissioned by Christ. He did not found a democratic society but one sharply divided into rulers and ruled.

And as this power of binding and loosing is one that concerns the permanent activity and even the very existence of the Church it must live on, as the Apostolic College, to which it was entrusted, itself lives on. Today, therefore, the hierarchy of the Church must still possess the power to break the chains of sin.

These passages are not, however, the decisive ones as to Our Lord's mind. Unless there were clear indications elsewhere that Our Lord had left to his hierarchical Church the power of forgiving sins there might remain some doubt as to whether it was to be certainly gathered from this promise of the power of binding and loosing. Here it is rather implicit. In His words to His Apostles after His resurrection it is quite explicit. In the account of His apparition in the supper room in

⁷ Matt. xvi. 17.

THE DOCTRINE IN SCRIPTURE

the evening of Easter day we read: "He breathed on them, and he said to them, 'Receive ye the Holy Ghost. Whose sins you shall forgive they are forgiven them, and whose sins you shall retain they are retained.' " ⁸ Immediately before uttering these words he had said, "Peace be to you. As the Father hath sent me I also send you," thus definitively commissioning the Apostles for their great work in the world. The power to forgive and to retain sins thus forms part of the wider commission, and Our Lord makes clear His mind that the power is included in the commission.

In considering Our Lord's words we start from the commission itself. The Apostles are "sent" by Him just as He Himself was "sent" by the Father. His sending was that of a vicegerent with absolutely plenary power: "You call me Master and Lord, and you say well, for so I am"; ⁹ "All power is given to me in Heaven and on earth." ¹⁰ His whole life was the exercise of gentle but commanding authority. One exercise of it which was most in evidence because it most excited the questionings of His adversaries was the power of forgiving sin. He allows no uncertainty as to His possession of this power. The incident in Matthew ii. 3-12, is most illuminating. "Son, thy sins are forgiven thee." "He blasphemeth. Who can forgive sins but God alone?" "That you may know that the Son of Man hath power on earth to forgive sins

⁸ John xx. 23.

⁹ John xiii. 13.

¹⁰ Matt. xxviii. 18.

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND CONFESSION

. . . I say to thee, 'Arise, take up thy bed and go into thy house.' " The miracle set the seal of His Father on His words and attested divinely their truth. Jesus could and did forgive sins.

And now He is sending His Apostles as He also was sent, and explicitly declaring that that mission extends to the forgiveness of sins. He so commissions them with the greatest solemnity. First, we are told, "He breathed upon them." This leads us to anticipate the conferring of some completely new and striking power. The word used, *ἐμφυσάω* is found only here in the New Testament. But in the Greek version of the Old Testament it is found in Genesis ii. 7, God, at the creation of Adam, "breathed into his face the breath of life"; Wisdom xv. 11, referring to the same; and Ezekiel xxxvii. 9, in the vision of the dry bones: "Come, spirit, from the four winds, and breathe upon these slain and let them live again." It is clearly a word that connotes a transforming, vivifying power. Here the Son of God "breathed" into His Apostles the Spirit of God, the spirit that quickens and sanctifies; that, however, not now in order to their own sanctification, but in order to the sanctification of those who should be vivified through their ministry.

There is no serious room for question as to the meaning of the words of Our Lord which follow. When He said to the paralytic, "Thy sins are forgiven thee," there was no suggestion of a mere

THE DOCTRINE IN SCRIPTURE

declaration of forgiveness obtained, nor of the offering of the means by which the sinner could eventually gain it. It was a question of something that Our Lord did there and then; something which He claimed to be able to do and proved by divine sign that He could do. And that something was the remission of the man's sins. Of course there must have been present in the sick man the necessary disposition of at least implicit sorrow, but the pardon was the Lord's free gift, bestowed in virtue of the power residing in Him. Now He sends the Apostles invested with His authority as He had come invested with His Father's authority, coupling with that divine mission the grant of power to forgive and to retain sins. This can only mean of forgiving and retaining as He Himself forgave and retained. Nor will the words used admit any other meaning. "Whose sins you shall forgive they are forgiven them"; ἀφένται, they have been taken away, *ipso facto*. To interpret the words of the remission of punishment merely is inadmissible. It is the sins that have been taken away according to the words of Our Lord. If he who has received the pardon which Our Lord commissioned His Apostles to give in His name still remains burdened in the sight of God by the guilt of his sins, these words are illusory. And we can only gasp at the mentality which would interpret these words as signifying that the Apostles have a declarative power—a

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND CONFESSION

power to state authoritatively that sins have been forgiven. In the first place, this is not what the words say, and in the second, how could the Apostles know, apart from a special divine revelation, that sins *had* been forgiven in a particular case? The sinner himself would know better than they would. Modern critics themselves are at one in regarding as forced and unnatural any interpretation of the words which makes them refer to anything but the act of pardoning sin.

No man could of himself merit the remission of grievous sin. Only the infinite Person of the Son of God incarnate could offer to the Majesty of God the satisfaction that atones. Jesus Christ has made that atonement, and it is for Him to decide in what way the merits of forgiveness that He has won shall be applied to the individual sinner. This is the way He has chosen, that of working through the pastors of his Church and making them the dispensers of His own forgiveness. As with the power of binding and loosing, this power of forgiving and retaining is not one that passed with the Apostles. Powers and duties granted by Our Lord to the Apostolic College as a whole remain as a permanent endowment so long as that College continues in being. Among the endowments of the hierarchical Church today, therefore, is the merciful and healing power which Our Lord entrusted to His Apostles on the evening of Easter day.

There are two main points yet to be discussed.

THE DOCTRINE IN SCRIPTURE

One is whether, by the institution of Christ, the power granted to the ministers of the Church is the necessary means of obtaining forgiveness of sins, or whether on the other hand, as some recent writers maintain, though it is a gift to be greatly valued the faithful are under no obligation to avail themselves of it. The other concerns the necessity of actual confession of sins as part of the Sacrament.

In considering the words of Christ we have emphasized rather the power of forgiving than of retaining sins. This latter, however, has very great importance, as determining in detail the nature of this means of forgiveness. For one thing the double power conferred, of forgiving or retaining, indicates that the minister of confession is acting as a judge, with the office of deciding whether to give the verdict which makes the sinner innocent or that which leaves him guilty. It may be noted that here the words again make explicit what is implicit in the promise of the power of binding and losing.¹¹ These words, as was said in connection with them, are a promise of universal jurisdiction, of universal power of imposing and removing all moral bonds. One branch of jurisdiction is juridical. The Apostles, therefore, have authority to act as judges, and to pronounce effective verdicts. That that authority extends to the court of conscience itself is put beyond question by these later

¹¹ Matt. xviii. 18.

words of Our Lord. Sins submitted to them are subject to their verdict and Our Lord Himself ratifies that verdict.

Now as they are so constituted judges in the case of sins, it follows that all who sin are bound to submit themselves to their judgment. If a certain class of cases is intrusted to a certain tribunal, that means that all cases of that class must come before that tribunal; unless, indeed, some were explicitly exempted, and Our Lord, by indicating no alternative, has shown that there is no such exemption.

The same conclusion follows when we consider the power of retaining in itself. "Retaining" is opposed by Our Lord to "forgiving." What is retained is simply not forgiven. "Whose sins you shall retain they are retained" means at least this, that if sins are submitted to the Apostles and those who hold their place, and they refuse to remit them, they remain unforgiven until those who have refused forgiveness consent to grant it. Otherwise this power of retaining means nothing at all. But if it means this it must mean more. If there were other means, quite independent of the Sacrament of Penance, of obtaining complete and final remission, the main effect of applying to the tribunal instituted by Christ would be the danger of finding oneself cut off from a means of forgiveness otherwise open. After applying and being refused absolution there would be no way of obtaining forgiveness but by applying again, in the hope

THE DOCTRINE IN SCRIPTURE

that the bar of retention would be lifted; whereas if one had never applied at all one would have the other means within one's power. Can this possibly have been the intention of Christ in making this solemn and merciful grant to His Apostles? And the power of retaining would amount to nothing if there were no obligation to submit oneself to the tribunal which could put it into operation. He could not be regarded as able to retain sins whose judgment on them need never be asked at all.

It is impossible, therefore, to maintain the doctrine that has recently attained a certain prominence, that in the Sacrament of Penance there is a valid means of obtaining remission of sins, but one to which no one need necessarily submit himself. It was instituted by Christ not as *a* means but as *the* means. By granting to the Apostles the power of remitting sins in the terms in which He did grant it, He imposed on the faithful the obligation of seeking forgiveness through this channel. At the same time this obligation arises from the positive will of Christ and not from the nature of things; and so recourse to the Sacrament is not of such necessity that its absence can in no case be supplied. The will can to a certain extent supply for the deed. In the case of those who are aware of the obligation, the act of "perfect" contrition, accompanied by the will and intention of receiving the Sacrament, justifies the sinner at once. There remains, however, by the positive will of Christ, the obliga-

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND CONFESSION

tion of submitting one's sins to the Church's tribunal. This must be done the next time one approaches the Sacrament of Penance. In the case of those who do not know of the obligation there can be no such explicit intention, but it is contained implicitly in their act of perfect contrition, in that that act of its nature involves an implicit willingness to carry out the whole of God's law, whether it depend on His positive command or on the inherent nature of good and evil.

Moreover, the Church has always understood the Sacrament to be of necessity as a means of remission only for mortal sins. Confession of venial sins is one way, and a most laudable way, of obtaining their forgiveness, but not the only way. Nor is this doctrine, derived from the constant tradition and practice of the Church, opposed to a rational understanding of the words of Our Lord. A sovereign setting up a tribunal does not thereby compel it to take cognizance of all offenses, even the most trifling. Mortal sins such as St. Paul enumerates in I Corinthians vi. 9, 10, are "sins" in a very different sense from those which are merely venial. By them the supernatural life of the soul is destroyed; the sinner ceases to be a child of God, and is for ever excluded from the vision of God, none of which is true of venial sins. The Church, therefore, is not overriding the plain sense of Scripture in interpreting her retaining power, and so the corresponding obligation in the faithful of submit-

THE DOCTRINE IN SCRIPTURE

ting to her judgment, of sins in this strict and most complete sense.

There remains to be considered the obligation of confession itself. It is not immediately evident that the fact that the Sacrament of Penance is the one means of obtaining remission of mortal sins involves the obligation of confessing them in detail. And indeed human nature rebels against it. It is a grave deterrent, keeping those away from the Sacraments who most need them. One can safely say that repugnance to the duty of confession was at the root of the Reformers' rejection of the whole doctrine of the Sacrament of Penance, whatever theoretical reasons they may have adduced for an innovation so agreeable to human nature. The question at once presents itself: granted that the tribunal of Penance is the necessary way to forgiveness, why should it not be sufficient simply to present oneself as a sinner and a humble suppliant for pardon?

But the duty of confession for those who have sinned grievously is incumbent on all from the highest in the Church downward. Those who were responsible for upholding the law were bound by it equally with their subjects. It is unbelievable that they and the whole Church would have accepted such a yoke if there were any room for doubt as to its necessity. The voice of Tradition alone would be a sufficient proof that this obligation had been imposed by Our Lord and communicated

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND CONFESSION

by Him to the Apostles, but here again it is not necessary to wait for the teaching of Tradition. Our Lord's words are clear in their implication.

As was said above, the Sacrament of Penance is a tribunal, a judgment seat. The minister of the Sacrament is not merely a "dispenser of the mysteries of God," he is also a judge. He can remit or retain. There is incumbent on him the duty of deciding which verdict he shall pronounce. He is the vicegerent of Our Lord—"As the Father sent me so I also send you"—to whom by the Father is committed supreme and universal power of judging: "Neither doth the Father judge any man; He hath given all judgment to the Son."¹² Our Lord has used this His supreme jurisdiction to institute a tribunal of mercy; a tribunal in which, in virtue of the infinite satisfaction made by Him for sin, the sinner, however grievous his transgression, can obtain the verdict which not merely declares but makes him free from guilt. It differs indeed from the tribunals we know in that its object is not to punish but to reconcile. Still it is a tribunal, and must have all the essential qualities of a tribunal. In it the minister of Penance sits as judge.

His judgment cannot be given in ignorance. He must know that about which he is pronouncing a verdict. If he is to decide whether to remit or retain he must know what it is that is to be remitted or retained. Short of this there is no judgment,

¹² John v. 22.

THE DOCTRINE IN SCRIPTURE

nor any means of arriving at a rational decision. And how is he to arrive at this necessary knowledge? What he is to give his verdict upon is sin as it is in itself and before God, not as it may have shown itself exteriorly. His only means of knowing is by the sinner's declaration. The penitent must himself submit his sins for judgment, otherwise they cannot be judged. Nor does a general accusation suffice. A judgment to be valid requires a reasonably exact knowledge of what is being judged. It is not the same thing to have done a wicked act, to have consented to a wicked desire, once, and to have done so ten times; it is not the same to have sinned against justice by theft and to have violated the same virtue by detraction. The very nature of the Sacrament therefore demands that the accusation be distinct as to number and species of the sins confessed. The penitent is at once the witness against himself—the only possible one—and the person accused. This accusation, then, is inseparably bound up with the Sacrament as Our Lord instituted it.

It is not, however, to be gathered thence that only those sins are forgiven which are actually confessed. If the penitent indeed wilfully conceals a grievous sin of which he is conscious he violates the command of Our Lord and makes the whole Sacrament invalid and sacrilegious. But sins which he omits by inadvertence are forgiven as if they had been confessed, though if they are afterwards

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND CONFESSION

remembered the obligation arises of submitting them to the tribunal appointed by Christ. The penitent is bound to do his duty as a witness: to take reasonable care by self-examination to arrive at the truth. When he has done that, mere inadvertence cannot be any bar to the infusion of grace which is the effect of the Sacrament, and so to the forgiveness of all his sins. Even incomplete confession may be impossible. One who is dumb cannot tell his tale by word of mouth, nor is he bound to write it; a dying man may be beyond the power of framing words. In such cases as these, confession, like the Sacrament itself, is necessary not in the nature of things but by the positive ordinance of Christ; the will can supply for the deed.

Knowledge of the sins of the penitent, however, is not the only knowledge which the minister-judge is to use in arriving at his verdict. There is also the question of the necessary dispositions of heart without which no sin can be forgiven, either within or without the tribunal of Penance. Is he contrite? Is he determined to avoid grievous sin for the future and to carry out the obligations which immediately present themselves? Very frequently the implicit manifestation of these dispositions suffices. A man who submits himself to the ordeal of humbly confessing his sins can be assumed to have complied with the easier conditions of making an act of sorrow and framing a purpose of amendment. But it may happen that the confessor has doubts on one

THE DOCTRINE IN SCRIPTURE

of these points; in that case it will be necessary for the penitent to manifest the state of his will. If the minister finds that he cannot resolve to give up a practice of sin, to set right an injustice that he has done and that can be set right, he is bound to withhold absolution. These dispositions equally with the sins determine the nature of the verdict to be given, and must equally be made known, either implicitly or explicitly.

The reader may be warned not to conclude from what has been written that the verdict to be pronounced, the giving or withholding of absolution, is at the mercy of the confessor's subjective views or inclinations. In the concrete case he has no choice. If his jurisdiction extends to the penitent's person and the sins confessed, and if the penitent's dispositions are such as are required by the law of God for the remission of sin, he is bound to give absolution; if one of these conditions is not fulfilled he is equally bound to withhold it.

It is hoped that for those who make the scriptures their immediate guide enough has been said to show that in no sense can the Sacrament of Penance be regarded as a man-made doctrine. For the Catholic the immediate guide is the voice of the living Church, through which Christ Our Lord still speaks today. In the chapter which follows it will be seen that she through the ages has witnessed to the same truths that are here gathered from the words of Our Lord.

CHAPTER III

CONFESSION IN THE EARLY AND MEDIEVAL CHURCH

It may frankly be admitted that in our relatively scanty records of the first Christian centuries evidence is lacking of a practice of private confession analogous in its details to that which prevails at the present day. We have no reason to suppose that bishops or priests took up their station at fixed hours in the churches, as is done now, and that the devout faithful of all classes had recourse to them every week, or once a month, to make avowal of their transgressions. Still less can we assume that after confession sacramental absolution followed straightway and that it was accorded, almost as a matter of course, to everyone who presented himself. All this represents a much later stage of development, and it is extremely difficult to trace the first steps by which the usage evolved which is now generally familiar. If, however, we abstract from the question as to whether confession was public or private and absolution immediate or deferred, evidence is not lacking even in the second century after Christ that an administration of penance existed which depended upon ecclesiastical authority and which carried into practical

effect a recognized power of binding and loosing. Our documents make it plain that at any rate those who more notoriously offended against the Christian moral law submitted themselves to a period of exclusion and expiation, and that these repentant sinners were eventually readmitted to the communion of the faithful and to the participation of the Body of Christ.

Undoubtedly there was a very strong feeling in the early Church that the power of reconciliation, especially in the case of the three deadly sins of apostasy, wilful murder and adultery, was to be exercised with the greatest reserve. As we may learn from Hermas, who wrote his book *The Shepherd* about the year 150, some teachers even went so far as to declare that there was no other penance save that (of baptism) "when we went down into the water and received remission of our former sins," for it is added that "he who had received remission of sins (by baptism) ought to sin no more, but should abide in purity" and also that "they who have just believed or are about to believe have not (in future) penance for sins open to them, but have (by baptism) remission of their sins in the past."¹ From this it might be inferred that the Christian who sinned after baptism was shut out from all prospect of future forgiveness. But as Père d'Alès has shown,² it is plain that this was

¹ Hermas, *Pastor*, Mand. IV, 3.

² Adhémar d'Alès, *L'Édit de Calliste*, pp. 68-84.

not the view adopted by Hermas himself, for he goes on to offer at any rate one chance of penance and reconciliation to those who in the time of special trial which then impended were willing earnestly to seek them. The period of the great persecutions was not an age for irresolute and fainthearted converts. The Christian teachers of that day could have had little temptation to lay stress upon the divine indulgence to inconstant waverers. Thus the main preoccupation of Hermas seems to be that the Church has no place for the recidivist, the offender who continually falls back into sin and who presumes upon unlimited pardon. In his idea every man who received baptism ought to understand that this remission of sins was God's supreme effort of mercy. The newly baptized Christian is bound to a complete change of life and he has no right to look for fresh pardon if he prove unfaithful. At the same time Hermas, almost in spite of himself, cannot refrain from proclaiming that repentance is possible to all and that forgiveness is not unattainable, even though he seems to restrict the period of this indulgence to a short season of God's special favor.

In the third century A.D. our materials grow more abundant and the teaching becomes plainer. Two clear tendencies can be recognized, the one inclining to a merciful treatment of the repentant sinner, the other uncompromisingly severe, so much so indeed as to declare the reconciliation of the

apostate or the adulterer to be beyond the power of the keys. It was Tertullian who in his later heretical writings contended that the bishop who absolved such offenders and restored them to communion was acting *ultra vires*. God might pardon them, but not the Church. All the same, even in his Montanist days, Tertullian admitted that "for less grievous delinquencies pardon might be obtained from the bishop," and it seems clearly to have been the accepted doctrine of the orthodox that some at least of the more flagrant offenders might obtain reconciliation for their grievous sins committed after baptism, though such admission to penance was to be conceded only once, and though a rigorous expiation must be enforced before there could be any question of absolution.

Undoubtedly the sterner spirit evolved by an age when fresh persecutions might break out at any moment, was at first very prevalent both in East and West. There was almost everywhere considerable difference of opinion as to the treatment to be accorded to those who after baptism were guilty of any of the three "capital" sins—apostasy, murder, and adultery or fornication. Feeling ran so strongly in many quarters that a papal decision, now commonly known as the Edict of Callistus, provoked passionate controversy and ultimately played a large part in the development of the Novatian schism. The decree in question seems to have emanated from Pope Callistus about the year

220 and it decided that communion might be granted after due penance to those who were guilty of adultery or fornication. That this edict represented any innovation of practice is not proved, but it was denounced by Tertullian, by the author of the *Philosophumena* (Hippolytus), and later by Novatian, as a measure of scandalous laxity. Nevertheless it was certainly upheld by the Church at large, and in the Decian persecution the weighty example of St. Cyprian at Carthage recognized the same milder discipline as admissible in the case of the *libellatici*, those, that is, who, without actually offering incense in pagan temples, obtained by bribery or some other device a certificate that they had complied with the Emperor's edict, in itself a kind of apostasy. The details are too complex to be discussed here. What mainly concerns us is the fact that beyond the *ex parte* statements of certain rigorists, there is really no evidence which proves that penance and reconciliation were systematically denied to any class of offenders, especially in view of the imminent peril of death. Unquestionably the most authoritative expression of the mind of the Church to which appeal can be made is embodied in the thirteenth canon of the Council of Nicea (A.D. 325), which is thus worded:

Regarding those who are passing from life,
the ancient and canonical law should continue
to be observed which forbids that anyone who

is on the point of death should be deprived of the last and most necessary Viaticum. If he does not die after having been absolved, let him have place with those who have the fellowship of the "Prayer" (i.e. in the highest rank of penitents). But, generally, in the case of any one soever who is on his deathbed, and who asks to partake of the Eucharist, let the bishop give it him after due investigation.

It will be noticed that this is described as "the ancient and canonical law" and the fact should warn us against generalizing from any isolated pronouncements of earlier date which represent certain classes of offenders as incapable even at the hour of death of admission to penance and formal reconciliation.

The principal difficulties which have been urged by critics against the existence in primitive times of a sacramental rite, identical with what is now loosely called "Confession," arise from a misconception of the essential nature of the Sacrament of Penance. We have to remember first, that confession itself, the detailed avowal of guilt, is not the principal element in the process which is crowned by the restoration of sanctifying grace. Sorrow for sin is the most indispensable of all the acts of the penitent, and, without this, forgiveness and reconciliation are for ever impossible. So far as concerns actual confession, the integrity required

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND CONFESSION

in the sinner's self-accusation is only relative. Good faith on his part is necessary, but his guilt and his responsibility vary indefinitely according to his knowledge or ignorance of the moral law, his memory of the past, his ability to explain himself, his physical strength or weakness, etc. In a more or less barbarous age many things which we now judge to be gravely criminal were popularly regarded as venial transgressions and they were not therefore in the individual case necessary matter for confession.

Secondly, there is no reason to suppose that sacramental confession cannot be public. The Council of Trent condemned the teaching that it *ought* to be public and that private confession is an abuse, but it is nowhere insinuated that because the avowal of guilt, and the imposition of penance may have been open and notorious they cannot therefore be sacramental. The Council, no doubt, affirms that private confession has always existed in the Church, but we are not thereby given to understand that there has never been any sacramental confession except that made in secret.

Thirdly, not less unfounded is the supposition that sacramental confession must of necessity wear the outward semblance of a religious rite. Even now a penitent might tell the sad history of a dozen misspent years over the dinner table or in a railway carriage, and then when his confessor is acquainted with the facts, a mere word or the simple gesture

of falling on his knees would suffice for the sacramental acknowledgment of his guilt and would warrant the confessor, if otherwise satisfied that the requisite dispositions were present, in bestowing absolution. Similarly the absolution, though nowadays of necessity imparted in a formula consecrated by authority, is in its essence merely the sentence of a judge, and might, so far as the principle is concerned, be as well conveyed by a direction to proceed to Holy Communion, or by such a gesture as laying the hand upon the penitent's head. Neither, of course, can any real difficulty be caused by the postponement of delivery of judgment. No better test could be devised of the penitent's sincerity than his submission during a term of years to onerous restrictions and his faithful performance of the good works imposed upon him by way of satisfaction. Though our modern practice of immediate absolution is more convenient, especially where penitents are numerous, there is nothing, even in a long delay, which would conflict with the sacramental character of the procedure.

It is not, then, in any way surprising if the administration of penance in the early centuries seems to bear little outward resemblance to that form of confession which has become so intimate a part of the life of the Catholic Church in modern times. As conditions have changed with the lapse of ages, widely varying phases have succeeded each other in the case of other sacraments, the divine

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND CONFESSION

institution of which no one calls in question. For more than a thousand years the faithful received Holy Communion under both kinds. They now receive under one only. In the age of the Fathers the laity were often permitted to take the Eucharist to their homes, to receive it into their hands and to carry it about their persons. All this has now long been forbidden. Just before the Reformation, even monks and nuns did not for the most part approach the holy table more than a dozen times a year, whereas at present almost all communicate daily. Yet the nature of the Sacrament has not changed. So again in the case of baptism we know that in the third and fourth century it was not an uncommon practice even among the religiously minded to defer the reception of the Sacrament until death was near at hand—such baptism was called “clinical baptism”—while for long ages after this abuse had been suppressed, infants, except when in imminent danger, were rarely brought to the font save at the festivals of Easter, Whitsuntide and the Epiphany. In modern times this delay would be accounted a scandalous, if not a sinful, negligence.

Let us note that the question of clinical baptism is not without its bearing upon our present subject. In many cases baptism was delayed because the catechumen hoped to pass out of this world while the waters of regeneration were still fresh upon his brow, and consequently before he had opportu-

nity to stain the robe of grace by fresh sin. Gorgonia, the sister of St. Gregory Nazianzen, was only baptized, so the orator himself tells us, shortly before her death, and yet it would seem that she had long lived the life of a fervent Christian. Now if, as is highly probable, a large proportion of those who formed the audiences of St. Augustine and his contemporaries were in a similar position, the fact must very considerably have reduced the number of those who needed, or were capable of receiving, the Sacrament of Penance. Further, supposing that this disposition to procrastinate existed in the case of that rite of initiation which is the gate of all the other sacraments, and that it was in large measure sanctioned by usage, it must follow that *a fortiori* those who *had* been baptized would be likely to put off to the very latest moment their recourse to that *secunda tabula post naufragium*, that second plank after shipwreck, in Tertullian's phrase, which constituted their only remaining chance of formal reconciliation. It will be remembered that many taught that though a baptized person who had fallen into one of the deadly sins might be admitted to penance and eventually absolved, still this could be permitted once only. He could look for no help from priest or bishop, even at the hour of death, if he fell a second time. This was certainly not true universally, but it seems to have been the prevalent belief in some parts of the world, and

the inevitable result must have been that many postponed their repentance until death was near at hand. May not the tendency be largely responsible for the fact that we hear comparatively little about the administration of penance, and also for the fact that the early conciliar decrees seem much more taken up with the case of people who sought reconciliation on their death beds than with the procedure to be adopted with those who privately made confession with a long spell of life still before them? The truth was, no doubt, that these last were few in number. Either a baptized Christian fell into open and scandalous sin, and in that case his penance was known to the world and was probably in some sense forced upon him by public opinion and the action of the bishop; or else his sin was secret, and then, as it was possible for him still to mix with the body of the faithful, he would have had strong inducements, under the severe discipline which then prevailed, to postpone the hour of repentance until age or infirmity warned him that death was not far off.

In these circumstances it seems by no means improbable that there was comparatively little recourse to the private administration of the Sacrament of Penance. Sin that was not grievous in its nature could be remitted by other means. This was clearly understood by all. From Origen downward the Fathers are prone to reiterate that for lesser sins the divine pardon could be won by

prayer, fasting, almsgiving and other works of zeal and charity. Neither does there appear to have been any general agreement as to which were the deadly sins that could only be remitted through penance and the absolution of bishop or priest. No doubt apostasy, murder and adultery belonged to that category, but even in the time of St. Augustine we may gather that the rude populace in all good faith were apt to regard many forms of wrongdoing, and notably sins of thought or even loose relations with their female slaves, as matters of venial moment.

As for the public admission to penance this clearly implied on the part of the bishop an exact knowledge of the sin committed and consequently also a confession of guilt on the part of the penitent. There can be no reason to doubt that such an avowal made with sorrow of heart and followed, as it was in due course, by reconciliation, had a sacramental value. It was a primitive form of the Sacrament of Penance. But side by side with the system referred to, plain indications exist of a modification of certain features in the procedure, entailing no publicity but equally including the three essential elements of contrition, confession and satisfaction. Perhaps from the very fact of its private nature, this second form of penance has left fewer recognizable traces in our early records. But while the first, in the course of ages, lost its sacramental character and is now practi-

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND CONFESSION

cally obsolete, the second, recommended by its secrecy and by the encouragement and security thus given to the penitent, has entirely supplanted the public discipline of penance and is by this time so identified with the sacramental exercise of the power of the keys that we cannot easily imagine any other.

The development by which this came about can be traced here only in very broad outlines. When Origen, about the year 244, speaks of the sinner who "bathes his couch with his tears and does not shrink from disclosing his sin to the priest of the Lord and from seeking a remedy"³ we are clearly upon the track of something very like our modern confession. Moreover, this is made still more explicit by what we read in another homily of the same writer:

Only look about thee carefully (he warns his hearers) for the person to whom thou shouldest confess thy sin. First make sure of the physician to whom thou shouldest lay bare the cause of thine ailment, who knows how to be infirm with the infirm, to weep with those who weep—so that in fine if he shall have given any counsel thou wilt act upon it and wilt follow it: if he have understood and foreseen that thine ailment is such as needs to be exposed and to be cured in the gathering of

³ Origen, *In Leviticum*, II, 4.

the whole Church, from which it may be that others, too, can be edified and thou thyself readily healed, this will have to be arranged with much deliberation and the experienced counsel of that physician.⁴

This clearly implies an alternative of public or private penance, the decision regarding which is to be left to the "physician," i.e. the bishop or priest. St. Cyprian, a few years later, is urgent in his exhortations that those who are conscious of sin should make known their transgressions to the priest. "Let every one, I beseech you," he says, "make confession of his sin while he who has sinned still belongs to this world, while his confession can still be received, while the atonement he offers and the absolution given by the priest may still find favor with God."⁵ Such language supposes a spontaneous recourse to the means of reconciliation; and in another place St. Cyprian is insistent that those who have not actually apostatized, or taken means to procure a *libellus* (the certificate of having offered sacrifice) but who had only entertained the thought of doing so, should make their confession of this weakness and "seek a remedy from the priests of God." And it is to be noted that the word *sacerdos* which I have translated "priest," is commonly applied, and even more properly, to the bishop himself. We cannot be blind to the signifi-

⁴ Origen, *In Psalmum* 37, II, 6.

⁵ Cyprian, *De Lapsis*, 29.

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND CONFESSION

cance of the fact that in all the early "Church Orders" the prayer used for consecrating a bishop contains an explicit reference to the power of forgiving sins. Dom R. H. Connolly in recent years has satisfactorily demonstrated that the so-called "Egyptian Church Order" is the oldest of the series and preserves for us the usage of the Roman Church in the early part of the third century. Now in that Order the consecrator prays:

Give, Thou knower of the heart, Father, unto Thy servant whom Thou hast chosen for the office of bishop, that he may feed Thy flock and minister as priest to Thee without blame, serving Thee continuously by day and night, supplicating to see Thy face worthily that he may offer Thine oblation in Thy holy Church in the spirit of the fulness of priesthood, having authority to forgive sin according to Thy commandment, and give the ordination of Thy ordinance, and loose all bonds of iniquity according to the authority which Thou gavest to Thy apostles.⁶

It would be very difficult to suppose that this explicit reference to the remission of sins, clearly associated as it is with the mention of the Eucharistic sacrifice, corresponded to nothing that was real in the life of the Church of those days. It cannot

⁶R. H. Connolly. *The So-called Egyptian Church Order*, in the Cambridge series of "Texts and Studies," pp. 16-19.

have been a phantom authority, with no practical application, which was bestowed in such solemn terms. We may regret the absence of fuller knowledge as to the precise working of the Sacrament of Penance, especially in its private form, but the power of the keys was certainly claimed for the ministers of the Church then as it is now, and its real efficacy was recognized by the faithful, even when it seemed perhaps to bear upon them with a sternness which we do not now associate with it.

To trace the later developments is comparatively easy. From St. Gregory Thaumaturgus (who died about 275), from St. Basil, and from the conciliar decrees, we can piece together a detailed account of the graded public penance which prevailed at this period in Asia Minor and in some other eastern Churches. The penitents were divided into classes—"mourners", "hearers", "kneelers" and "bystanders"—representing various degrees of exclusion from participation in the liturgy. The "mourners" were prohibited from entering any part of the church. They could only station themselves outside the door and ask the prayers of those who passed in. The "bystanders" formed the highest grade. They were allowed to be present at the great consecratory prayer of the liturgy; only the reception of the Eucharist was denied them. The discipline of which we read appears almost impossibly severe. Fifteen, twenty or even thirty years of penance are spoken of as

a penalty for some more grievous crimes. At the same time where the sin was secret—in the case of an adulteress, for example, who spontaneously accused herself to the bishop—she seems to have been protected from the loss of her good name. She took rank among the “bystanders”; which only meant that she was debarred from receiving Communion, until absolution was eventually accorded, no doubt privately. On the other hand, in comparison with Asia Minor, the penitential system of the Syrian churches was remarkable for its leniency. Where St. Basil prescribed years of penance, the Syrian clergy imposed weeks. Nowhere do we find in early times a more emphatic insistence upon the power of the bishop to bind and to loose than in the Syrian *Didascalia* (c. 280 A.D.), and it is there also that we come upon what is perhaps the earliest allusion to a formal rite of absolution. “When a sinner repents and weeps,” the bishop is told, “receive him; and when the people have prayed for him, lay thy hands upon him and allow him henceforth to be in the Church.”

It is a noteworthy fact that St. John Chrysostom, whose influence in mitigating the administration of penance was afterwards so great, was a native of Antioch in Syria, where also he spent many years as a priest. The famous orator seems to have been the first ecclesiastic of eminence to lay down the principle that the power of the keys might be exercised for the benefit of the individual sinner as

often as he needed forgiveness and sought it with true contrition of heart. The seventh of the charges brought against the Saint at the Synod of the Oak was drafted as follows—"that he (Chrysostom) encourages presumption in sinners, teaching thus: 'If thou sin again, repent again, and as often as thou sinnest, come to me and I will heal thee.' " Whatever may have been the foundation of this indictment, it is certain that the Saint showed himself a resolute opponent of the Novatianist faction, then so powerful in Constantinople. And the epoch marked a turning point in the Church's attitude to penance. Pope St. Innocent I, who was Chrysostom's contemporary, points out that the rigor formerly shown in the matter of reconciliation was now no longer called for in the same degree. In the times of persecution there was grave danger that if those who fell away were easily restored to communion, men would fail in the hour of trial because they were confident that indulgence would afterwards be shown them. From the same Pontiff's letter to Decentius we learn that at Rome, while the duration of penance was largely left to the decision of the priest in accordance with the dispositions he perceived in the penitent, still it was the general rule that absolution should be granted to all on Maundy Thursday, clearly to enable them to communicate on Easter day. This was an observance which, in the case not only of public, but of private, penance,

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND CONFESSION

persisted in the Western Church for many centuries.

Fifty years later, in the time of Pope St. Leo (A.D. 440-461), we get many clear illustrations of what we might call the interpenetration of public and private penance. On the one hand, St. Leo is emphatic in upholding the penitent's right to secrecy regarding those matters of which he has made avowal to the priest in private. He strongly condemns a practice of which he has heard, in accordance with which a document was drafted and read in public embodying the particulars of the penitent's delinquencies.

It is quite sufficient [the Pope declares] that the accusation of consciences be made known to the priests alone in secret confession. For although the fullness of faith seems to be praiseworthy, which on account of the fear of God does not shrink from blushing before men, yet because the sins of all are not of such a sort that they can face without alarm the thought of having them published, let so objectionable a custom be put away, lest many be repelled from the remedies of penance, who either are ashamed, or who dread the disclosure to their enemies of deeds of theirs for which they may be brought to ruin under the provision of the laws. For that confession suffices, which is first offered to God and then

IN THE EARLY AND MEDIEVAL CHURCH

also to the priest who makes supplication for the sins of penitents.⁷

On the other hand, we find in the historian Sozomen, who wrote about the same period, a description of public penance as it was still maintained in Rome, although, as he remarks, it had been discontinued in Constantinople more than half a century earlier.

In the churches of Rome [he says] the place of those who are in penance is conspicuous: they stand with downcast eyes and the seeming of mourners. When the divine liturgy is concluded, not partaking of those things (the Eucharist) which are lawful to the initiated, with wailing and lamentation, they cast themselves prostrate on the ground. Also the whole multitude of the Church with loud crying are suffused in tears. After this the bishop first arises and raises the prostrate ones, and having prayed in such sort as is fitting on behalf of the sinners who are doing penance, he dismisses them. Meanwhile in private each spends so much time as the bishop has appointed him in voluntary self-affliction, or in fastings, or without ablutions, or in abstinence from meats, or in such other practices as have been assigned him. On the

⁷ St. Leo, Epistle 168.

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND CONFESSION

appointed day having discharged his penalty like some debt, he is absolved from his offense and takes part with the rest in the assembly of the faithful. This procedure the bishops of the Romans preserve from old time even to our own day.⁸

The features which are made prominent in these last citations seem during many centuries to have been characteristic of the administration of the Sacrament of Penance in the Western Church. On the one hand, the relations between the sinner and the confessor, ordinarily a simple priest, to whom he addressed himself, were in no sense public. The priest heard in secret his avowal of guilt, questioned him, prayed with him and delivered judgment upon the matter submitted, assigning a suitable penance. There is good reason to suppose that in many cases, when the penitent's dispositions were satisfactory, absolution was given upon the spot; though this did not necessarily excuse him from presenting himself at the general ceremony of reconciliation conducted later on by the bishop. On the other hand, when the penitent had to acknowledge transgressions of a more grievous nature—and it must be remembered that in a rude and barbarous age, as we may learn from the Penitentials, crimes were rife at which our present civilization is, or pretends to be, horror-stricken—

⁸ Sozomen, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, VII, 16.

a severe and lengthy penance was imposed, and absolution, which had to be sought from the bishop himself, was only accorded in the public reconciliation of penitents just referred to, which usually took place on the Thursday before Easter. Thus, while the confession was private, the penance and absolution were often in large measure public. At the same time it is not safe to generalize rashly. Although the evidence available on the subject in the early Middle Ages is fairly abundant, the questions of detail involved are very intricate, and many currents of local influence, notably the practice of the Irish monks, brought to the Continent through St. Columban and other missionaries of that race, would have to be taken account of in any careful study of developments.

Only one or two items of greater importance can be dealt with in the space here available. And first occurs the question whether there was in early ages any general use of confession; even though it was put forward as the means divinely appointed for the remission of sin. It has been quite commonly maintained and notably by Dr. H. C. Lea in his two big volumes on the subject, that Confession was infrequent even as late as the eleventh century. Dr. Lea contends that the Lateran decree of 1215, *Omnis utriusque sexus*, prescribing under penalties the annual reception of the Sacraments at Eastertide was a momentous event which imposed an entirely new obligation and transformed the spir-

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND CONFESSION

itual life of the Church. This presentment of the case is certainly not borne out by an unprejudiced reading of history. In every part of the ancient Christian world—in Asia Minor, Syria, Constantinople, Africa, Rome, Spain, Gaul, from the fourth century onward, there is hardly a writer whose works do not supply frequent references to confession, and that in a form which shows it to have been made in dependence upon some exercise of the power of the keys. The very universality of these allusions is a strong argument in favor of the tradition which attests the divine institution of the Sacrament. Nor is it merely that ecclesiastical writers reiterate their warnings and appeals, without producing any effect upon those whom they address. We find from an early date a systematic organization which at the beginning of Lent brings the penitents to church to make their confession, to have ashes sprinkled on their heads, to listen to the exhortations of the bishop or priest, and to set about the penance which is to qualify them to receive absolution before Easter day. Such historians as the Lutheran Professor Hauck in his *Kirchengeschichte Deutschlands*, or Caspari in the *Realencyclopädie für Protestantische Theologie und Kirche* are no more friendly than Dr. Lea to Confession regarded as an institution, but they attest that already in the sixth century confession in Germany exercised a notable influence upon the people, and that in the ninth century it was “an

established custom." "After the preaching of the word of God," says Hauck, "confession was the most powerful means which the clergy possessed of making an impression upon the populace committed to their charge."⁹ Not without significance is the fact that among the scanty memorials which survive of the rude popular speech of central Europe during the ninth and tenth centuries, the most numerous and important are the "*Beichtformeln*," forms of accusation, which rendered to the penitents of those days and the confessors who questioned them the same sort of service as a modern examination of conscience provides now.

In England the traces of confession as an important factor in the everyday religious life of the people are perhaps even more unmistakable. "Shrove-Tuesday" is simply Confession-Tuesday; *scrift-scir* (shrift-shire=confession-district) was the ordinary Anglo-Saxon term for a parish. Every mass-priest was supposed to possess a Penitential (or *scrift-boc*). An Anglo-Saxon child was taught to pray for his father, his mother and his "scrift" (confessor). The English law-books of that period, even those relating to secular matters, abound in references to confession, and we have many tractates in Anglo-Saxon explaining how confession is to be made. Neither would it seem that this duty was confined to the lenten season. In the middle of the eighth century the Dialogus of

⁹ Hauck, *Kirchengeschichte Deutschlands*, Vol. II (1900), p. 727.

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND CONFESSION

Archbishop Egbert of York, asserts that since the time of St. Theodore of Canterbury (c. 670) it had been a praiseworthy custom in England that not only clerics in monasteries, but also laymen with their wives and children should "betake themselves to their confessors" not only in Lent, but before yuletide, that they might cleanse their souls to receive communion on Christmas day.

Another point upon which there has been much misconception is the question of the secrecy of sacramental confession. It was perhaps not unnatural that in the earlier period when public and private penance were not very clearly distinguished, explicit legislation concerning what came later to be known as the *sigillum*, or seal, of confession, should be lacking. No doubt there has been, especially of recent years, a notable tightening in the interpretation of the rule. But there was from the first a clear understanding, as might be inferred from certain pronouncements of St. Gregory Thaumaturgus and St. Leo, to which reference has been made above, that the confidences freely made by the penitent ought to be respected.¹⁰ It is a quite unwarranted perversion of the facts to declare, as a historian of note has done, speaking of the second half of the twelfth century, that "secrecy was not of the essence of confession in those days—the doctrine

¹⁰ As early as 527 the council of Dovin in Armenia decreed that any priest who betrayed the secret of confession should be smitten with anathema.

of the seal of confession had not yet been heard of; it was the inevitable result of the enforcement of auricular confession in a later time." This cannot be admitted. There is, to begin with, a decree incorporated in the *Corpus Juris* and belonging at latest to the close of the eleventh century which runs as follows:

Let a priest take heed that in the case of those who confess their sins to him he do not repeat to any one, either relatives or strangers, the sins that have been confessed to him. If he do otherwise let him be degraded, and for all the days of his life, let him be an object of scorn doing penance as a pilgrim.

It would not be easy to affirm the duty of secrecy more strongly, and we find Archbishop Lanfranc using similar language. But this did no more than stiffen with penalties a perfectly well understood obligation. Benedict of Aniane and Bishop Jonas of Orleans in the ninth century speak in terms which make the matter perfectly clear; as for example when the latter declares that "those who confess their sins to the priests in secret confession and who blot them out by the satisfaction of worthy penance are on no account to be betrayed." And to take a still earlier illustration, Cynewulf, the Anglo-Saxon poet (c. 780), evidently assumes that secrecy is of the essence of confession when he writes, describing the confusion of the wicked at the Day of

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND CONFESSION

Judgment—I quote Sir Israel Gollancz's modern rendering:

There they abashed, o'erwhelmed with ignominy,
Shall wander giddily, bearing their evil deeds,
The burden of their sins, whilst all folks gaze.
'Twere better for them had they erst felt shame
For all their evil works, before one man,
Telling God's servant that too well they knew
Ill deeds within them. The confessor cannot look
Through the flesh into the soul, whether a man
Telleth truth or lie, when he his sins avoweth.
Nathless a wight can heal each noxious ill,
Each unclean sin, if he tell it but to one;
And none may there conceal, on that stern day
Guilt unamended, multitudes shall see it.

That the prolonged exclusion from the Sacraments, and more particularly the very severe fasts and other austerities, prescribed in the Penitentials for sins of a graver kind defeated their own purpose by frightening away from confession many who most needed it is probably true. Even while the Penitentials with their tariffs of expiations were still being multiplied both in England and all over the Continent, it was clear that they were often found to be unworkable in practice. The result was that a system of commutations came into vogue, substituting for these long periods of rigid penance, money fines and the recitation of psalms or pater-

nosters, sometimes accompanied with toilsome genuflexions. It is quite probable that the decree of the Council of Lateran in 1215 was prompted by a realization that the result of these compromises had not been very happy. In any case the precept of annual confession and communion, with its penalty of excommunication and exclusion from Christian burial, seems to have gone hand in hand with a very notable mitigation of the penances which the sinner was called upon to perform. Still further relief was afforded when the privilege granted to the Friars of hearing confessions wherever they went, made it possible for yeomen, serfs and others who could not well shift their domicile, to have an occasional change of confessor. It is probably true that under these conditions, better and more regular use was made of the Sacrament of Penance by the bulk of the population. But though some at an earlier period may have procrastinated and feared its rigors, there was never a time when the body of the faithful had any doubt in their hearts of the benefits it conferred. Throughout the Middle Ages intellectual respect was paid by all to an utterance, attributed unwarrantably to St. Jerome, which we find prefixed to many copies of an Anglo-Saxon instruction on confession.

When anyone would make confession of his sins, let him play a manly part, and not be ashamed to confess by accusing himself of his

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND CONFESSION

crimes and misdeeds, because from this cometh remission, and because without confession pardon cannot be had; for it is confession that heals, confession that justifies, confession that bestows forgiveness of sins.¹¹

¹¹ The best available summary of the early history of the Sacrament of Penance will be found in the article "Pénitence" in the *Dictionnaire Apologétique de la Foi Catholique*, edited by A. d'Alès. The article in question is contributed by Adhémar d'Alès and P. Galtier. See also Batiffol, *Études d'Histoire et de Théologie Positive* (1920), pp. 329 et seq. and Tixeront, *Apologetical Studies and History of Dogmas* (Eng. trans.).

CHAPTER IV.

CONFESSION JUDGED BY REASON AND EXPERIENCE

When we come to regard the Sacrament of Penance from the standpoint of reason we cannot expect the same conclusiveness as when we consider it in the sources of divine revelation. It belongs to the supernatural order, to the order which is above and beyond reason. The whole concept of a Sacrament, as of divine Grace itself, belongs to that order. The Church declares, taking literally the words of Our Lord and the teaching of St. Paul and St. John, that God has been pleased to raise those whom He has "justified" through the merits of His Son to a new Life. This is a life superadded to, on a higher plane than, the whole natural life of intelligence and free will. "This is the testimony (of the Son of God) that God hath given to us eternal life. And this life is in His Son. He that hath the Son hath life. He that hath not the Son hath not life."¹ By this life a new relation is set up between us and Almighty God. We are raised above the plane of creaturehood and become sons

¹I John v. 11, 12.

and daughters of the Most High. "See what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the Sons of God; and so indeed we are."² Jesus Christ Himself becomes the "firstborn amongst many brethren."³ This life, the life of the sons of God, is divine "Grace," God's free gift to man.

Its immediate source is the Holy Spirit of God, who comes Himself to dwell in those who are so raised. "God hath sent the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying, Abba, Father."⁴ They become "temples of the Holy Ghost." He dwelling within them quickens them to divine life as our spiritual soul dwells in and vivifies our body of clay. He is active within them as the soul is active in the body. Their moral acts take on a new character. Man's actions, viewed merely as his own, can have but the tiniest worth in the eyes of God, before whom the nations are but as dust in the balance; performed by man indwelt by the Spirit of God they take on an eternal value. And these actions are transformed in themselves. In those who are raised to supernatural life knowledge of God becomes the permanent, infused gift of Faith, a gift which overleaps the bounds set to unaided human reason; love of Him becomes the divine virtue of charity, without which man, though he speak with

²I John iii. 1.

³Rom. viii. 29.

⁴Gal. iv. 6.

JUDGED BY REASON AND EXPERIENCE

tongues of men and of angels, is but as sounding brass and clashing cymbal.

But it is beyond the grave that this life, "eternal life," comes to its full fruition and activity. The life of the blessed consists in the sight of God face to face, in the possession of Him who is all beauty and all loveliness. But He is beyond the whole field of vision of nature. He "inhabiteth light inaccessible, whom no man hath seen nor can see."⁵ Only to those who have been raised above the plane of nature is this vision possible. It is the complete act of supernatural life, that to which it is ordered. That we may grow supernaturally, may make ourselves capable in greater and greater measure of this possession of God in the endless life to come, is the entire purpose of our transitory life here.

To the Catholic this world of the supernatural is very real. He knows that his every effort of virtue sets its mark upon him, giving him, if he be in the grace of God, a greater share in that divine gift. It was to restore to man this life that the Word of God became flesh; for this He suffered and died in the human nature He had assumed; for the creation and fostering of this life He left behind Him His Sacraments, by which his merits should be applied to the souls of men. But of all this supernatural life human vision sees nothing. It is hidden from the eye even of him who possesses

⁵ I Tim. vi. 16.

it. By mere experience he cannot so much as be certain that it is there. Still less can he see its growth from day to day, whether through the merits of his own good acts or by the gift of Christ's Sacraments. On the Mount of the Transfiguration the glory that belonged to Jesus as the only-begotten Son of the Father blazed out for a moment and blinded the eyes of those who beheld. Save for that moment it was hidden from every eye. So within those who have been quickened by the Spirit of God there dwells unseen the splendor of the adopted sons of God—"the glory of God" St. Paul calls it, even in them—which shall blaze out only when we have exchanged shadows for realities.

With the main effect, therefore, of Penance, as of all the Sacraments, reason and experience can have nothing to say. It is for the eye of God alone. We can only accept the word of the Son of God that here we have a means, ordained by Him, of re-creating us into that life if we are in death by sin, of increasing it unto our eternal glory if we are already in life. It is only as regards the externals of the Sacraments, their administration and the effects that do betray themselves visibly, that reason and experience afford any ground for forming a judgment.

From the external view so presented it has been argued that confession, as practiced in the Church of Rome, cannot be of God. It is said on the one hand to be a cruel thing, more than human

nature can endure; on the other to make forgiveness so easy that sin is encouraged. So far from these accusations being true, the institution we are considering is so wonderfully adapted to human needs and so potent a means of good that its visible nature and effects rather lead one to the positive conclusion that it could not be the result of mere human contriving. Though at first sight so opposed to human nature, it is, and for centuries past has been, in constant use, and a tremendous power for men's peace of heart and moral elevation. It at the same time makes such demands and shows such insight into the heart of man that the conclusion appears well-nigh irresistible when one weighs the facts justly, that only He who created human nature and knows through and through the creature, half angel and half animal, that is the work of His hands could have devised such an instrument.

It is said the confession is an intolerable burden, heavier than man can be expected to bear. Indeed it is not an easy and a pleasant thing, at least if there be anything of importance to confess. But would one who has the spiritual welfare of the world, or even of himself, at heart, have the forgiveness of sin altogether easy and pleasant? The danger is ever with us, that we should come to look on the transgression of the law of God lightly. No doom strikes us in the moment of transgression; the world can be as fair to one who has sinned

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND CONFESSION

as to one who has preserved his innocence; and so we are in ever-present danger of forgetting that it is an evil thing to desert the Lord our God. Every one of his commandments is a protection to our human nature against what would lower and degrade it; none of them is laid down arbitrarily. All this we are in danger of forgetting. It is well that we should at least feel some of the bitterness of sin in the shame of having to confess it, that so it be brought home to us what we have done. And the offense demands some atonement. It could hardly seem right that everything should be wiped out without a pang to the offender. Justice demands that he should pay some price, just as his own best interests demand that the process of forgiveness be not so easy that he is thereby led to sin again and perhaps more grievously.

And, if there is a price to pay, how abundantly is it worth while in the light of the gain that flows from it; gain, not merely in the hidden effect upon the supernatural life of the soul, but in clearly perceived advantages of peace of mind, counsel and strengthening. It is a wonderful thing to *know* that one has been forgiven. Without the Sacrament of Penance how hard must be the way to peace for one who has lived for years a life of sin, or for one who has been guilty of a grievously wicked act, a murder or the seduction of an innocent girl. Of course in such a man the voice of conscience can be deadened and he may not know remorse. God help

such a one. What will be his awakening? But suppose that he has a conscience. How is he to find peace? How can he know with certainty that Almighty God has taken him back into His friendship? It is well-nigh impossible that he should, and lives have certainly been spoiled by the dreadful uncertainty whether the soul was burdened with guilt or not. The Sacrament of Penance gives this certainty, in so far as it can be had in this life. This does not mean that one who has so sinned and confessed can simply go his way and forget that he has done wrong. Though he has been forgiven the fact remains that he has done the thing, and if his conversion be a true one his whole life will be an atonement. But that abiding repentance is in no way incompatible with deep and heartfelt peace. This is indeed the "peace of God that passeth all understanding"—that is deeper than could come from any human contriving—that St. Paul prayed might be a guard and shield to his converts of Philippi.

Moreover, quite apart from the forgiveness received in the Sacrament of Penance, and the peace that comes from the knowledge of that forgiveness, the mere unburdening of one's mind to another who listens with sympathy brings peace. But one may not feel able to tread this hard way to peace; nor, indeed, find a confidant who can be trusted to keep one's secret. It is a wise and kind provision of Our Lord that forces us, even against

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND CONFESSION

our will, so to open our hearts if they are heavy with the burden of sin, and at the same time provides us with one to share our burden upon whose secrecy we can absolutely rely. No one has ever suggested that there is any untrustworthiness among priests with regard to the secrets of the confession. Many a man has come away from confession filled with hope who had entered it almost in despair, and this in great measure through knowing that his struggle is no longer a lonely one, that there is one ready to watch it with interest, to whom he can turn when dark days come and even when he fails.

Some words of Martin Luther's will bear quoting here: "I would not for all the treasures of the world give up private confession, for I know what strength and comfort it has been to me. . . . Indeed the devil would long ago have done for me had it not been for confession."⁶ Luther made confession optional; thereby he put these advantages practically out of the reach of those who need them most, for these are the ones least likely to face voluntarily the ordeal of self-manifestation.

Confession, it must be owned, is hard for those who have a grievous tale to tell, but precisely for them it has its greatest compensations. Our Lord has provided just the means that can help their case. Many a man or woman whose whole life would have been clouded by a sense of guilt has

⁶ Cf. Hartmann Grisar, *Luther*, Eng. trans., Vol. V, p. 320.

found peace of soul through the healing words of absolution. Many, too, who would in despair have given up the struggle against their own lower nature have been strengthened to perseverance and final success by the unfailing presence of one with whom they could share the burden.

On the other hand, it has been said that the Sacrament of Penance makes forgiveness so easy that it becomes a positive incitement to sin. If one knows that there is so close to hand a means of escaping the eternal consequences of transgression of God's commands, the greatest deterrent vanishes. God's will is that all men should be holy. For that end He has warned them of the dreadful doom that awaits those who rebel against His law. It is not likely that He has robbed that warning of its terrors and so put a premium on wickedness.

It might be argued whether in the concrete case the fear of God's punishments is indeed the greatest deterrent to the sinner. They are, or appear to be, far distant. In spite of their awfulness they have not the effect upon the imagination, and so upon action, that something nearer at hand would have. Belief in them is what Cardinal Newman, in the *Grammar of Assent*, calls notional rather than real. Here and now, the knowledge that one will have to confess, and that soon, is likely to have as great a practical effect, especially for one who has already been through the ordeal.

But however it may be theoretically, there is no

doubt that practically confession, so far from leading men to sin more easily, is a most potent agency in deterring them. Every parish priest knows that the only effective way to keep up the moral tone of his parish is to promote among his flock the regular practice of confession. It is the same in dealing with individuals. Regular confession is the indispensable means of checking and overcoming a habit of sin as it is the most efficacious way to prevent such a habit's being formed. The power of confession as a moral restraint came much into evidence, in Germany in particular, during the period immediately succeeding the Reformation. When that restraint was removed by the action of the Reformers the tide of license swelled beyond all bounds. This was recognized by the Reformers themselves. Thus Luther:

This preaching ought by rights to be accepted and listened to with great joy, and everyone ought to improve himself thereby and become more pious. But, unfortunately, the reverse is now the case and the longer it endures the worse the world becomes . . . for now we see people becoming more infamous, more avaricious, more unmerciful, more unchaste, and in every way worse than they were under Popery.⁷

⁷ Grisar, *Luther*, Eng. trans., Vol. IV, p. 210. Much the same state of things prevailed in England in the reign of Edward VI. Cf. Kennedy, *Studies in Tudor History*, pp. 113, 114.

Hence came the subsequent attempts on the part of the leaders of the Reformation to reintroduce the practice of confession. Thus in the Confession of Augsburg, article 25 of the second part reads: "Confession in our churches is not abolished. For the Body of the Lord is not wont to be given except to those who have confessed and been absolved." But these attempts were doomed to failure. The one thing that could have made such legislation effective was omitted, the divine sanction.

The reason for the power of confession as a moral restraint is not far to seek. It does not consist chiefly in the repugnance that may be felt to confession itself. But a definite and firm spiritual act is demanded of the penitent. Every Catholic knows that before he can present himself for absolution he must first have repented sincerely of his sins and determined with all the strength of his will to avoid them and the dangerous occasions of them. If he has not done this, and with sincerity, the Sacrament, so far from bringing him pardon, will merely increase his guilt. Here, quite apart from the grace of God that comes to him through the Sacrament, is a definite break in a course of sin, a new start marked with a certain solemnity, a new engagement made both with himself and with his Maker. It is safe to say that among those to whom the obligation of confession is unknown, such a turning away of the whole man from sin is a sadly rare thing in the case of those who are entangled in

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND CONFESSION

the meshes of an evil habit. Such an act at least makes it impossible to acquiesce in the continuance of sin. If frequently repeated with honesty and determination it is bound eventually to produce its effect. And indeed it does, as anyone who has experience in hearing confessions can testify.

Moreover, there is the accusation itself as an aid. This must be made with simplicity and truth. The Catholic knows that it is useless to give his shortcomings a deceptive coloring, to obscure facts, to tell half-truths. God, who reads the heart, will not ratify a verdict based on dishonest witness. This means that the penitent must face up to his sins. He must be honest with himself before he can be honest with his confessor. We all of us know the danger that exists of living in a fool's paradise, especially regarding our moral state. Therein lies, perhaps, the most common obstacle to true conversion of heart. There can be no conversion until one acknowledges oneself a sinner, and ceases to be pleased with oneself. One can say with certainty that in confession there is to be found the most effective safeguard that exists against the danger of self-deception. Nor does the safeguard consist only in the necessity imposed of facing up to one's sins in the secrecy of one's own conscience. One has to tell them. This means, seeing them as they must appear to another: seeing them, consequently, in a much truer and less flattering light than that in which they are likely to be viewed if only one's

JUDGED BY REASON AND EXPERIENCE

own eye is to regard them. So one is saved from sinking into a state of self-complacency—a state which would bar all possibility of moral improvement. God has given us a supreme guide in the voice of conscience. In one who persistently refuses to heed its warnings it makes itself less and less heard. It can finally die away altogether.

The devil, when a man hath served him well
And scarce a thought doth struggle or rebel,
Lifteth his hands to bless, and on that soul
Softly there falls the perfect peace of hell.

This deadening of conscience is the greatest moral disaster that can overtake a man. It is by keeping alive the voice of conscience that confession saves us from living in fools' paradises. It is not unreasonable to ascribe to more than human wisdom the imposition on man, in the teeth of his inclinations, of an obligation that so protects and strengthens this God-given guide.

So far in considering Penance as a moral aid we have regarded the immediate duty of the penitent. But the confessor also has his part, and a great one, in making this aid efficacious. That confession had the vast effect it has had in bringing about moral improvement is due in great part to the devotion and wisdom of those who have given themselves to the arduous work of the confessional. It is the confessor's office to aid the penitent by his

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND CONFESSION

knowledge and experience. He is to be physician and teacher as well as minister of the Sacrament. To fit the priest for the performance of these duties is the end of a great part of his long training. The Church does not leave such important matters to chance or to the private zeal of the individual. She has a great mass of practical knowledge, the fruit of her age-long experience in dealing with souls. The aspirant to the priesthood is instructed in the light of this knowledge; before he is admitted to the work of the confessional his fitness is severely tested; he goes to that work a trained man, not an amateur. There has been much talk of late years concerning psycho-analysis, spiritual healing. All that is best in that science, if science it can be called, the Church has possessed for ages past, and utilized in the confessional.

As physician the confessor aims at diagnosing the cause of the penitent's failings, and suggesting remedies to avert future falls. The confessional lends itself particularly to fruitful admonition. Exhortation from the pulpit is often disregarded, as not applicable to himself, by the one who needs it most. In the confessional the warning is given in view of the particular circumstances of the individual. Moreover, those who come to confession have—indeed, they must have—a sincere desire of emendation. The warning addressed to them there has, accordingly, an incomparably better chance of being heeded. In the discharge of this duty, it need

hardly be said, the exercise of discretion is called for. If the confessor sees that his advice will be resented and disregarded, though it should not be, he is discharged from the duty of offering it, that is, provided it concerns only the penitent's private good. Again, in the case of those who go regularly and frequently to confession, it is likely that there will be nothing particular to be said. In one case the confessor is bound to speak, viz., when he sees that the penitent is, without necessity, placing himself in circumstances which, though not in themselves sinful, render grievous sin almost inevitable. In such a case he must warn the penitent of his absolute obligation to avoid these dangerous occasions of sin. If he is not prepared to make such a resolution, it will be the confessor's duty to refuse him absolution. Absolution, if given, would be invalid, as the penitent has not that determination to avoid sin for the future which is the necessary condition for divine forgiveness. He would be equivalently clinging to sin at the very moment that he is seeking pardon for it.

The confessor has also a duty as teacher. We spoke above of the voice of conscience. Conscience, besides speaking with greater or less insistency, can be more or less delicate, more or less instructed. There is no school of consciences, and so no school of morality, equal to the confessional. One meets sometimes the most astonishing misconceptions as to the elementary principles of morality. Nowa-

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND CONFESSION

days we seem to be witnessing in a modified form a return to the conditions which marked the decadence of Greek and Roman civilization. Then many manifestations of viciousness—cruelty, unchastity even in unnatural forms, the practice of abortion, to instance but a few—were not merely rife, they were unreplicated. The moral judgment was vitiated. Something of the same mentality, though differently manifested, seems to be with us today. Old standards of right and wrong have, with large sections of the population, gone by the board. License is more than tolerated: it is justified. This is bad for the individual and bad for the nation.

Where the moral life is under the influence of the confessional, such a state of mind simply cannot exist. At least people cannot help knowing their obligations, however far they may fall short of living up to them. For it is the duty of the confessor to instruct his penitents where they need instruction. In the pulpit general laws are formulated. In the confessional they are applied in the concrete. There can be no question as to the greater delicacy and correctness of consciences where the practice of confession prevails. In this confession has rendered incalculable services to society. One presumes it will not be questioned that it is a service to society to instil a truer and more exacting knowledge of the principles of morality. The less men demand of themselves in the way of self-

JUDGED BY REASON AND EXPERIENCE

restraint—and morality means self-restraint—the more they approximate to the condition of the lower animals. The dictates of morality are founded in the dignity of human nature itself. If they are persistently outraged, the consequences will, somehow or other, work themselves out, even though the person responsible escape, through ignorance, the guilt of formal sin. An institution which seriously and effectively combats the prevalence of such ignorance deserves the gratitude of mankind. This the confessional does, in so far as the weakness of the human instrument permits. Catholics, through their obligation of confession, cannot remain in good faith and at the same time blind to their primary obligations. As regards purity, for instance, they know that there is not one law for women and another for men, that account must be rendered for every wilful sin of thought as for sins of act; they know the sanctity that fences round the marriage act. As regards justice, again, they may find themselves brought sharply up against their obligations by being told, as the confessor is bound to tell them, that pardon is impossible unless they will restore what they have acquired by unjust means, that damage knowingly done must be repaired, that lying and injurious words must be unsaid. This duty of instruction covers the whole field of morality, and there is no direction in which its influence has not made itself felt. Christ set His Apostles to be the light of the

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND CONFESSION

world. Surely we can see here one of the ways in which, through their successors, they are still shedding round them the light of His truth.

These two objections, on the one hand that confession is an intolerable burden, on the other that it makes pardon too easy, have been dealt with at length because a full consideration of them suggests a conclusion directly opposed to that which their propounders would draw from them. Confession, so far from being an evil, is a gift of such far-reaching beneficence that it may well be believed, from that mark alone in all its circumstances, to have God for its author. It has been further objected that the confessional is open to grave abuses, but nothing follows from that either as to its excellence or as to its origin. With very few exceptions all good things can be misused for evil purposes or with evil result. Our free will itself, our greatest gift in the natural order, is responsible for all the moral evil there has ever been in the world. And the Church is alive to the danger. The severest legislation in her code has for its end the protection of the Sacrament of Penance. One hears very little indeed of abuses beyond vague generalities. This can only mean that they practically do not exist. If they did exist one would hear of them. When one considers the millions of priests, all of them subject to the weaknesses inherent in human nature, who have been employed in the work of the confessional, the sub-

JUDGED BY REASON AND EXPERIENCE

stantial immunity from abuses that marks that institution must appear at least a very striking thing. It may be due to the Church's vigilance, but it is not unreasonable to see in it a manifestation of the Providence of God, protecting a divinely ordained but vulnerable instrument of sanctification.

In this chapter we have considered confession as it is in the concrete, as a working institution. In judging it we may well bear in mind the words of Gamaliel: "If this counsel or this work be of men it will come to nought, but if it be of God, you cannot overthrow it."⁸ This should be peculiarly true of an institution that runs counter to man's deepest instincts, as does confession. He is impelled to hide his shame if possible even from himself, still more from other men, who are always of the same clay as himself, whom frequently he knows to be no better than himself. Man does not willingly humble himself. To become as a little child, to submit to teaching and guidance, means self-conquest. All this confession demands of the penitent in the concrete. Moreover, except in the other-worldly sense no one has anything to gain by it. Least of all have the priests. For them it means many weary hours in the confessional, with attention on the stretch all the time, as one never knows when one will be confronted with a serious problem; with nothing to sustain but the consciousness that good is being done. They themselves

⁸ Acts v. 38, 39.

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND CONFESSION

have to confess equally with the laity. It is not necessary to consider the silly calumny that priests receive money for absolution. Nothing could be further from the truth, nor does any educated person believe it nowadays. As far as priests themselves are concerned, all that confession means is a heavy addition to their responsibilities.

Pastors and faithful, then, alike find confession an exacting thing. Yet it continues. So far from coming to nought it is perhaps more faithfully practiced today than ever before since the ages of faith. Is it then of God? The Church affirms that it is. From the beginning she has attached only one meaning to the words of Christ: "Whose sins you shall forgive they are forgiven them; whose sins you shall retain they are retained," the meaning they bear on their face. It is hoped that some reader may be led by the considerations set forth above to weigh those words well. He may perchance find in them for himself the words of eternal life.

BX Geddes, Leonard.

2265 The Catholic church and confession, by
G4 Leonard Geddes and Herbert Thurston. New
York, The Macmillan company, 1928.

104p. 20cm. (Half-title: The Calvert
series)

1. Confession. 2. Catholic church--
Doctrinal and controversial works--Catholi
authors. I. Thurston, Herbert, 1856-1939,
joint author. II. Title.

334775

CCSC/ss

